

Eugenics and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

Robert Lewis Stevenson's novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* depicts the two lives of a prominent man in 19th Century England. This fictional piece has a leitmotif of a scientific and social movement popular at the time of its publication: eugenics. Eugenics is based on the belief that certain human traits are superior to others. The movement called for selective breeding in order to abolish traits believed to be less evolved, with the goal to enhance the evolution of the human race. Stevenson's novel presents the idea of eradicating people with primitive characteristics in order to cleanse the world of those who would inhibit the evolution of humankind. Stevenson's representation of Mr. Hyde correlates primitive features with malevolence; furthermore, it represents that idea that there is a savage nature within each human being, regardless of class or ethnicity.

The article "Education, empire and social change in nineteenth century England" explains the way the "imperial gaze" snuck its way into culture which is defined as "a fascination with the unknown and the exotic; a scientific curiosity to discover, collect, classify and explain; an economic desire to find and exploit; as well as mixed motivations from religious, humanitarian and nationalistic impulses to convert, 'civilise' and dominate" (Watts 775). The "imperial gaze" is evident in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as Mr. Hyde is described with the features of a primitive man and the author links these features to his evilness and Jekyll is described as a respectable gentleman which draws the correlation between behavior and physical features which pushed the eugenics ideas into the literary aspect of British culture further implying the imperialist viewpoint which serves as a tool to "certain cultural values within imperial discourse" and "celebrating the English as the white, Anglo-Saxon 'master race'" (Watts 778).

The reader is first introduced to Mr. Hyde through testimony of Richard Enfield, a distant cousin of the lawyer, Mr. Utterson. He describes his encounter with Hyde in a

distressful manner, raising alarm in Mr. Utterson. The first time in the novel that Hyde is associated with evil is when Enfield describes the shock of witnessing Hyde trample over a young girl and leaves her lying in the street. Enfield says, “it was hellish to see” (Stevenson 33). His description of Mr. Hyde is that of “a little man who was stumping along.” On closer examination of Hyde, Enfield describes Hyde in a sinister way: “a kind of black sneering coolness” and “Like Satan” (Stevenson 34). Enfield points out that Hyde is not welcomed in the community as he describes him as being surrounded by “a circle of such hateful faces” (Stevenson 34). Enfield then says, “He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity” (Stevenson 35). He also mentions that it was strange for a man of his appearance to be wealthy. This establishes the idea that there is certain physical criteria that must be met as a measure of upper class society. This description of Hyde demonstrates the way literary discourse is used to promote the eugenics movement: “Across Europe, indeed, fears of a ‘superior’ white ‘race’ being swamped by ‘inferior’ ones led to obsessions with measurements of cranial size and brain weight which had gendered as well as racial implications” (Watts 781).

What is known of Mr. Utterson is that he is “lean, long, dusty, dreary, and somewhat loveable” (Stevenson 31). His friends “were those of his own blood” and “his friendship seemed to be founded in a similar catholicity of good-nature” (Stevenson 31). The narrator immediately establishes Utterson on the upside of morality. The reader can assume he is well educated due to his career as a lawyer. He also behaves in a polite, respectful manner. Along with being Dr. Jekyll’s lawyer, Mr. Utterson has a close friendship with Jekyll and is genuinely concerned about his welfare. But Utterson’s name suggests something so subtle that it may be easily overlooked. As a verb, the word “utter” means to speak. Much of the novel is filtered through Utterson, so his account of Hyde represents a civilized man speaking on account of an uncivilized man. This concept represents colonialism, which is the driving force behind the eugenics movement.

As an adjective, “utter” is defined as absolute and “forming the exterior part or outlying portion” (OED). Utterson has suppressed the inner primitive portion of himself and he only exposes the outermost segment of his being, which has been shaped by civilized

society. He is Stevenson's portrayal of the complete civilized human, with a subtle flaw: Utterson is able to distinguish the cruel behavior of Mr. Hyde, but is frightened upon looking at him. This is due to the idea that Hyde's rudimentary nature serves as a mirror for the suppressed, primitive nature of Utterson's inner being.

Connecting with Hyde's savage appearance is the feature of the empowerment he brings to Dr. Jekyll. Jekyll reflects on the strength he felt from turning into Hyde: "I was not only well known and highly considered, but growing towards the elderly man, this incoherency of my life was daily growing more unwelcome. It was on this side (Hyde) until my new power tempted me until I fell in slavery" (Stevenson 82). The strength Jekyll gains from becoming Hyde is so empowering that he can no longer resist it. This empowering trait is explained by the father of modern eugenics, Francis Galton: "(I)here is a correlation between bluntness of moral feelings and those of bodily sensation; thus the 'worse' the criminal the less sensitive he will be to pain" (Forrest 247). By being less sensitive to pain, one can endure more physical exertion, thus having strength that one who feels pain may not exhibit.

When Mr. Utterson encounters Mr. Hyde, the reader is given a clue that Utterson finely distinguishes that Hyde and Jekyll are the same person. This recognition implies that Utterson's mind is evolved and sophisticated enough to have a developed intuition: "he had long grown accustomed to the quaint effect with which the footfalls of a single person, while he is still a great way off, suddenly spring out distinct from the vast hum and clatter of the city" (Stevenson 40). The narrator further establishes Utterson's credibility by referring to Utterson as a "gentleman" (Stevenson 42). Utterson then observes "the manner of a man he had to deal with" (Stevenson 40). What is unique about this observation is that the physical appearance of Hyde is the way in which he is being judged by Utterson: "small and plainly dressed, even at that distance, went somehow strongly against the watcher's inclination" (Stevenson 40). This should be an unreasonable way to pass judgment, but due to his good nature and accurate awareness, Utterson has been established as credible. Furthermore, upon his direct contact with Hyde, Utterson asks him to show his face. The way Hyde is described: "pale and dwarfish...the impression of deformity without any nameable

malformation...a displeasing smile... murderous mixture of timidity and boldness, and he spoke with a husky, whispering and somewhat broken voice” does not distinguish a distinct characteristic that is necessarily negative of Hyde (Stevenson 41). His appearance is simply unfamiliar; so in Utterson’s mind there must be something menacing about this man who does not look, walk, and talk like himself. With the unfamiliarity in mind, Hyde is perceived through Utterson as savage. He then depicts Hyde’s laugh as animalist and unrefined as he recalls that Hyde “snarled aloud with a savage laugh” (Stevenson 41). Even laughter, which is a raw emotion, must be contained in civilized society to a proper tone and volume.

The negative connotations of Hyde’s appearance can be explained through scientific literature of the late nineteenth century. Herbert Spencer wrote on the physical features of the primitive man and states “evidence taken in the mass implies an average relation between barbarianism and inferiority of size” (Spencer 321). The generalization of categorizing behavior from physical appearance as Edward Tylor explains the uniformity in various indigenous tribes from all parts of the globe. Tylor quotes Dr. Johnson’s observation of this equivalence: “one set of savages is like another” (Tylor 319). The notion that all indigenous cultures harbor the same physical and psychological characteristics sets the stage for any individual exhibiting features that seem primitive to be deemed uncivilized.

Utterson immediately reflects on the encounter he has with Hyde by calling out to God, which, again, establishes alliance with civility: “God bless me, the man seems hardly human!” (42). He goes on to say that Hyde resembles a being of prehistoric times. Utterson’s association with good is met with a contrast of evil: “O my poor old Jekyll, if I ever read Satan’s signature upon a face, it is on that of your new friend” (42). This contrast of good and evil establishes the idea that persons that have features and/or characteristics that are unfamiliar are viewed as less developed on the evolutionary scale, therefore condemning them to savagery and evil-mindedness.

Dr. Jekyll is a distinct man in terms of his appearance. He is tall, well dressed, wealthy, and a notable member of elite society. His title as a doctor gives credibility that he is educated, intelligent, and wealthy. His servants respect him and worry about him when he falls ill. His seemingly fatherly protection of Mr. Hyde establishes the idea that he is also

caring and compassionate. But when the plot reveals that Jekyll and Hyde are the same person it founds the idea that even the most elite members of society have a primal nature within them which is usually hidden by layers of education, wealth, and upper societal conditioning. Dr. Jekyll acknowledges that Hyde is uncivilized. In Jekyll's letter he explains that if Hyde should find the letter "Hyde will tear it to pieces" (92). Dr. Jekyll is aware that Hyde is uncivilized and violent, yet he continues to drink the potion that transforms him into Hyde. This is the author's way of demonstrating that if people of primitive nature are not suppressed, they will gain strength and take over even the most civilized society.

Hyde represents the basic core that each human being carries within them. His name has a dual meaning. Phonetically the name Hyde, as a verb, represents hidden basic nature of human beings. As a noun, it portrays a type of clothing made of animal skin that is often worn by indigenous people. This is significant in establishing that the uncivilized societies are viewed as wearing their basic nature on the outside, as opposed to suppressing it under layers of social conditioning.

Because eugenics calls for discouragement of reproduction of the lower class, it is noteworthy to mention that Utterson momentarily believes that Hyde is possibly Jekyll's illegitimate child. The idea of Hyde being a product of a relationship with a woman of a lower class represents the idea that procreation among lower and upper class people will result in the deterioration of the upper class:

He was wild when he was young; a long time ago to be sure; but in the law of God, there is not statute of limitations. Ay, it must be that; the ghost of some old sin, the cancer of some concealed disgrace... year after memory has forgotten and self-love condoned the fault. (43)

Furthermore, the notion that Hyde represents a primal core all humans carry, can be seen in the science of the late nineteenth century: "In Stevenson's story, an analogous, albeit much darker, fluidity is in evidence at the centre of identity, a fluidity which, subsequently, conceals at least two- and perhaps many- selves" (Davis 213). Davis goes on to point out that the story is "about the relationship between the mental and the physical" (Davis 215). When Jekyll drinks the potion to physically transform into Hyde, his psychological state follows

suit. In his article “Dr. Jekyll’s Two Bodies,” Martin Danahy points out, “when he (Jekyll) becomes Mr. Hyde he switches from a ‘decent’ and respectable body into the ‘indecent’ body of a working-class man... while the hedonistic body is marked both as ‘degenerate’ and of lower social class” (Danahy 23). This transition from “decent” to “indecent” reiterates the concept of associating physical form with moral decency and psychological wellness, which is the core of eugenics.

Although Jekyll transforms into Hyde’s body, it is noteworthy to examine the fact that he does not change clothes: “Mr. Hyde looks like a gentleman thanks to his ‘decent’ clothing but his behavior, the conduct of his body, contradicts his appearance” (Danahy 24). Hyde still wears the sophisticated clothing of Dr. Jekyll, but they fit him loosely, signifying the concept that people with primitive features do not fit into civilized culture. The looseness of Hyde’s clothing calls attention to the idea that gentleman attire does not fit his body, suggesting that the clothing of a gentleman is only made for tall men, not those that are small and primitive.

While Stevenson demonstrates the fundamental principles of the eugenics movement by giving a man of small stature and dark skin a villainous role, it is meaningful to note that Mr. Jekyll willingly transformed into Hyde knowing the power he has over him. This power became empowering to him because he is able to strip away artificial cultural rigidity and allow himself to indulge in his instincts and impulse without the scrutiny a gentleman may face. This conscious decision to liberate himself from civilized culture makes Jekyll, at his core, nothing more than a well-dressed, well-educated savage, which demonstrates that this primal core is within each human being; perhaps that is why it is so frightening to the characters in the novel. Dr. Jekyll, himself, acts fearful when he hears of the murder Hyde is thought to have committed, yet he continues to transform into him completely, either for empowerment or perhaps he had no choice and the primal force of Hyde took over the civilized Jekyll, as the science of the time was attempting to prove that some races were more superior than another: “throughout the century many social constructs were based on biology” (Watts 781).

Although Stevenson illustrates that within each person there is an inherently primitive, uncivilized side, he portrays this primitiveness as evil and a threat to society. Furthermore, each individual who cannot suppress this uncivilized nature must be stopped because it is a threat to the civilized society of the British Empire. Ironically, this primitive nature is within each human being, although the social movement of eugenics theorizes that people with what are said to bear primitive features are not to breed with more evolved groups of people in order for humans to continue climbing the evolutionary ladder. Dr. Jekyll says in his letter: “My devil had been long caged, he came roaring out” and “the spirit of hell awoke in me and raged” (Stevenson 86-87). It is significant to note that Utterson chooses his friendship based on similar social class and personality characteristics (Stevenson 31). If Dr. Jekyll, who is a high-class man, has within him a primal force that can overtake his sophisticated nature, each individual has the possibility of having the same unrefined, ferocious core within him or her. This is what makes this novel so haunting and why it can be argued both sides of eugenics movement. On one hand, those with a basic, uncivilized nature are a threat to the civilized world and must be stopped in order to prevent the degeneration of the human species. On the other hand, this primal core is evident in all human beings when the outer shell molded by society deteriorates; therefore, by calling for the elimination of certain groups of people due to this primal core, eugenics essentially calls for the elimination of the human race.

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